Practical guidance for service personnel at every career stage

Military Virtues

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Alan 'Blues' Baker is a retired officer who served as the 16th Chaplain of the United States Marine Corps from 2006 to 2009. Dr Baker was the first graduate of the United States Naval Academy and former Surface Warfare Officer selected as a Chaplain Corps Flag Officer. He established and served as principal of Strategic Foundations where he taught, coached, and catalyzed organizations valuing the intersection of learning, leadership and faith. He is a deeply experienced executive with over 20 years of international leadership in complex organizations. His former public service spanned from Dean of the Chapel at the U.S. Naval Academy to the Presidential nomination and Senate appointment as Rear Admiral where he provided executive oversight to a global team of several hundred professionals. Blues brings extensive background in ethical leadership, education, organizational development, and strategic planning.

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PERSEVERANCE

Overview

Alan T. Baker

"If you're going through hell, keep going."

– Attributed to Winston Churchill

The story of Louis Zamperini captured the attention of the Allies in the 1940s and again in recent years thanks to the biography by Laura Hillenbrand, *Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption*. We discover a troubled youth who took up running and became a star athlete competing in the 1936 Olympics in Berlin. After World War II broke out, Zamperini became a bombardier on a B-24 bomber that eventually crashed and sank in the Pacific Ocean. Louis and another airman survived a milestone 47 days adrift at sea. They floated on a flimsy life raft in shark-plagued waters before being found. Their celebration was quickly dampened by the stiff realization that their rescuers were also their enemy. Louis became a prisoner of war and endured constant brutality at the hands of one particular guard who regarded this former Olympic athlete as his 'number one prisoner.' This guard was so notoriously abusive that he was listed as 23rd on General MacArthur's 40 most wanted war criminals following the war.

Louis Zamperini exemplifies the military virtue of perseverance. As Laura Hillenbrand describes, "Confident that he was clever, resourceful, and bold enough to escape any predicament, he was almost incapable of discouragement. When history carried him into war, this resilient optimism would define him."[1] His persistence and endurance serves as a beacon

1 Laura Hillenbrand, *Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption* (New York: Random House, 2010), 7.

calling us to embrace and emulate his strength. Zamperini exemplifies how perseverance earned him admiration from his colleagues. It also gained him deep respect from his adversaries.

That was World War II. But what about today? The virtue of perseverance collides with our over stimulated, dopamine enriched, instant gratification culture. Within this highly saturated 'one click payment' society, could it be possible to retrieve perseverance as a deeply desirable virtue for military commanders and leaders seeking to serve ethically within the military system? Is it reasonable to expect officers and enlisted personnel to practice and embody the personal virtue of perseverance? As Louis Zamperini exemplified perseverance, can our current generation of military leaders maintain the admiration of their colleagues and gain respect from their potential adversaries by practicing perseverance?

Perseverance is a conditional virtue. Unlike other virtues discussed throughout these surrounding chapters, perseverance has prerequisites that separate it from other laudable virtues such as justice, obedience, loyalty, and courage. In other words, perseverance is contingent upon two preexisting conditions: time and suffering.

The first prerequisite for perseverance concerns our concept of time. Although the notion of time will be addressed later within this chapter, perseverance is a process and increases in value over a duration of time. It cannot best be described by a moment in time. We cannot point to perseverance and define its value by a single episode such as we can by telling the truth, taking an oath of loyalty, or dispensing justice. Each of these other virtues have specific and singular examples for us to reflect upon and say, 'Yes, that was a virtuous act.' However, perseverance has no particular event to highlight because it encompasses a process of time and not a single event or sequence of events within time. There is a *pattern* of perseverance whereas there is a *practice* of loyalty or justice or courage or humility. The longer the duration of time, the greater one grows in perseverance.

The second prerequisite for perseverance is that it grows deeper as a consequence of trials and suffering. Those who are not suffering have neither the awareness or need to persevere. Their comfortable lifestyle and living conditions are such that they do not see themselves as persevering. Nor would they likely be aware of other people who, through their suffering, are persevering. No one would say the wealthy, beautiful, and privileged practice perseverance. They may be committed to speaking truthfully, honoring their commitments, and being socially responsible, but they are not developing perseverance. Those who are free from suffering have little

incentive to grow the virtue of perseverance. Instead, they would isolate themselves from activities or occasions that might stimulate this virtue. Is it possible that insurance companies tap into our avoidance of suffering by allowing us to pay premiums to reduce risk? Although avoidance of trials seems like a very reasonable ambition, it is simply not possible. We cannot isolate ourselves no matter how high the insurance premiums. There will come seasons of suffering and conflict in which we are given an opportunity to either cave in to despair or grow deep in the virtue of perseverance. As a writer of ancient wisdom once remarked, 'To everything there is a season ... A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace.' No one seeks suffering. We attempt to flee from suffering but it always finds us. Yet it is only within the crucible of suffering we discover and grow the virtue of perseverance.

As a military chaplain, I spent the first Gulf War living in a small tent next to an unnamed airstrip in the Arabian Desert along with 4,500 U.S. Marines. The U.S. Marine Corps motto is 'Semper Fidelis,' which means 'always faithful.' The Marines often abbreviate their motto to 'Semper Fi.' It must be their recruit training experience that instills their love for writing, speaking, or shouting 'Semper Fi' whenever the opportunity arises. Of course, the motto offers me wonderful cannon fodder for extemporaneous sermons to Marines regarding God's faithfulness.

Yet even chaplains suffer from despair. At one discouraging point during combat, I sat in my lonely tent wondering why God had placed me here. Why would God want me in the desert, surrounded by all the noise of jets and frequent Scud missile alerts?

Ingeniously resourceful, the Marines repurposed a large dry erase marker board for outlining and hopefully shortening my sermons. I mounted this board inside my tent. As I considered my discouragement and sought remedy, the word came to me – 'clarify.' Maybe I was stuck in the desert to clarify my purpose and life's vision. Maybe God wanted my aspirations distilled down to serving others willingly with a whole heart. So, I wrote 'clarify' at the top of this blank whiteboard.

I reflected a while longer, and after some time I sensed another word – 'purify.' I thought to myself that God frequently took people away from society's distractions in order to purify them for higher purposes. I wrote the word 'purify' on the board immediately below 'clarify.'

Finally, I sensed one more word – 'mortify.'

I remembered that in the early centuries of church history, anchorite monks suffered and persevered in the desert for extended periods of time. Some of them built isolation platforms for the express purpose of mortifying their flesh and thereby increasing their faith.

In the desert, far from home and family and comfort, I saw I had become a reluctant follower of their early path. So, I wrote the word 'mortify' under the first two.

Before the ink dried, I could hear several aircraft on final approach after a combat mission. I left my lonely tent and ran to the flight line in order to welcome the pilots back.

My fog lifted as I experienced first-hand the pilots' relief at successfully and safely completing their mission, as I witnessed the esprit-de-corps of the ground crew as they quickly turned around the aircraft for another take-off. My discouragement was washed away as I found myself smiling at the optimism of those Marines. I was encouraged. I had renewed vision and a sense of purpose here in the desert. I had hope.

As I returned to my empty tent, I saw a Marine had dropped by while I was away. Maybe he wanted to talk. He left me a message. To the three words on my board, the Marine had added a fourth: Clarify, Purify, Mortify, *Semper Fi.*

He had given me a valuable and much needed message that transcended the three earlier words. These two Latin words, *Semper Fidelis,* allowed me to grow in perseverance within my own crucible of suffering. God, who is *always faithful,* reminded me to be faithful as their chaplain.

Simply because trials are universal does not mean they are always present. This opportunity to practice the virtue of perseverance was unique to my time in combat. We gain perseverance in response to current suffering and we grow in perseverance as we accept the possibility of future trials. Our character is shaped by practicing perseverance in the ordeal of suffering. Character does not produce perseverance. It is the other way around: perseverance produces character.

Two truly heroic leaders who exemplify the warfighting virtue of perseverance are George Washington and Winston Churchill.

Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer, David McCullough, in his graphic description of the battles of the War of American Independence of 1776, describes George Washington as someone who, in the face of overwhelming odds, would simply not give up. He realized his soldiers lacked sufficient weapons, proper training, and basic supplies. Disease plagued the soldiers frequently. Washington suffered from arrogant subordinates who sought to displace him.

> He was not a brilliant strategist or tactician, not a gifted orator, nor an intellectual. At several crucial moments he had shown marked indecisiveness. He had made serious mistakes in judgment. But experience had been his great teacher from boyhood, and in this, his greatest test, he

> learned steadily from experience. Above all, Washington never forgot what was at stake and he never gave up.
>
> Again and again, in letters to Congress and to his officers, and in his general orders, he called for perseverance – 'for perseverance and spirit,' for 'patience and perseverance,' for 'unremitting courage and perseverance.'[2]

Winston Churchill was not only one of the greatest twentieth-century leaders, he also exemplified perseverance. Throughout his life, he suffered numerous disappointments. Whether enduring frustrating years in school, leading his nation through the hardships of World War I, when he departed from government following the disastrous Gallipoli Campaign or struggling with his own unpredictable emotions and speech impediment, Winston Churchill persevered. One of his greatest gifts as a warrior turned Prime Minister was his ability to inspire others who faced obstacles they feared they could not overcome.

On a visit to his old school, Harrow, in 1941, Churchill addressed the young men: "Never give in, never give in, never, never, never – in nothing, great or small, large or petty – never give in except to convictions of honour and good sense. Never yield to force; never yield to the apparently overwhelming might of the enemy." This speech is often quoted but what is less known is that immediately after that phrase he added, "We now find ourselves in a position where I say that we can be sure that we have only to persevere to conquer."

Both Churchill and Washington exemplify the professional military virtue of perseverance. They embody the two prerequisites of perseverance by living through experiences that were not simply episodes in time but processes of time that included suffering. Let us now seek to understand two specific attributes of perseverance: persistence and endurance.

Persistence

Examples of military service illustrating the virtue of perseverance abound. Angela Duckworth, professor of psychology and a 2013 MacArthur Fellow, published her first book, *Grit*, with an affirming subtitle, *The Power of Passion and Perseverance*.[3] The book's introductory sentence confirms the valued intersection of perseverance and military culture, "By the time you set foot on the campus of the United States

2 David McCullough, *1776* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 293.

3 Angela Duckworth, *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance* (New York: Scribner, reprint edition, 2018).

Military Academy at West Point, you've earned it." Why would a civilian professor from a public university draw an example of perseverance from the military? It is because perseverance holds two core elements essential to military readiness. These are persistence and endurance.

The principle requirement needed for persistence is patience. While patience is frequently underappreciated within our hyperactive society, it achieves remarkable outcomes for those who intentionally practice this unique element of persistence. In a culture prone to action, patience seems counterintuitive. In warfare, where speed-to-decision may be critical to battlefield success, patience seems optional. After all, doesn't the practice of patience compete against immediate action? We see patience popularized in old Hollywood war movies with the order, 'Don't fire until you see the whites of their eyes.' How can patience be a virtue? Because patience is also an intentional activity that values resolve above immediacy. It must be exercised as a healthy antidote to impulsivity. Patience provides the human with generative time for reflection before action. Its application and habituation limits unintended or adverse consequences. This is why parents insist their children 'count to ten' when they become angry. It serves to diffuse and reframe their anger. Patience is also built into strategic national defense decision-making by requiring nuclear release authority to follow a chain-of-custody and not simply a quick press of a button. The greater the potential consequences, the higher the necessity for patience.

Persistence not only requires patience, it requires firmness coupled with resolve. You cannot persist without a foundation of patience. By slowing the process down, patience actually strengthens an organization as it unlocks time based capacity-building tools such as prioritizing, phasing, scaling, delegating, and experimenting. Without patience, these capacity-enriching tools are easily overlooked. I am reminded of Leo Tolstoy's line from *War and Peace*, "The strongest of all warriors are these two – Time and Patience."[4]

Persistence increases agility among military members by forcing them to focus on the strategic imperative as they habituate healthy responses to frequent change. To quote Stephen Covey, "The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing." For example, Henry Ford's first two companies went out of business. His third had extremely low sales. Yet rather than abandoning his dreams, he maintained the strategic imperative of changing transportation. In the midst of collapsing businesses, his failures spurred him forward to find a better way to mass-produce affordable cars.

4 Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace* (1869).

He wasn't in the car manufacturing business. He persisted in the strategic imperative of changing transportation.

Several years ago I spoke with Ron Johnson, then Senior Vice President of retail operations for Apple. Ron pioneered the concept of the Apple Retail Stores and the Genius Bar. He achieved a stunning level of growth by exceeding a billion dollars in annual sales within two years of their debut. I complemented him on the Genius Bar. I said, "I love the fact that I can now walk into a place to repair my computer." Ron simply answered, "The Genius Bar is not there to repair computers. It is there to repair relationships." Ron understood the value of persistence. He increased the agility of employees by having them retain the strategic imperative of valuing relationships over products. He prioritized the customer over the product. He scaled the Genius Bar to fit consumer demand. He, like Henry Ford, was in a strategic business. Whereas Ford persevered by changing transportation, Johnson persisted in strengthening relationships.

Complex organizations facing unfamiliar and potentially volatile situations have a high need for leaders who persevere. The longer you persist, the greater your resolve. The greater your resolve, the stronger your basis for decision-making. The stronger your foundation, the more successful your mission.

A military model for this dynamic can be developed based on an analysis of the United States Marine Corps recruiting model. Recruiters were incentivized and promoted based on the number of enlistments they achieved. Their goal was to cast a wide net. Yet the number of volunteers inducted did not correspond to the actual number of graduates from basic training. Attrition was high. Many inductees were simply not fit or were not prepared to meet the challenges faced during recruit training. The Marine Corps then changed the recruiting model by requiring their recruiters to adopt a new metric based on the virtue of perseverance. Recruiters were no longer incentivized and promoted by the number of enlistees they brought on the bus to recruit training. Their success was now based on the number of enlistees who actually graduated from basic training. The model was flipped from entrance to exit. Successful recruiters now had to exercise prudence while their recruits practiced perseverance to make it through recruit training. This military recruiting model required both persistence and endurance in order to produce flourishing outcomes.

Endurance

If the first requirement for perseverance is patience, the second ingredient of endurance follows closely behind. Endurance is frequently understood

as both positive and long term. Whereas the duration of persistence is short term, the focus of endurance is the distant horizon. As mentioned earlier, persistence and patience grow capacity for an organization. The core element of endurance is different than that of persistence and patience. It enriches personal competencies by generating hope. Endurance contributes to members within the organization by accelerating growth of their individual competencies. Persistence keeps the focus on 'one day at a time.' Endurance seeks to 'keep the long look.'

My story of joining the military integrates these concepts of persistence and endurance. I was a product of the Southern California public school system. It did not discipline me to be academically rigorous. When I graduated from high school, I received an appointment to the United States Naval Academy. The news of my appointment was a surprise because it came very late. I was humbled to learn I was the alternate candidate. The primary appointee turned down his nomination at the last moment. If I accepted, three days remained as a civilian before shaving my head and reporting as a plebe.

I sought the counsel of my elders. My father loved me very much. He wanted me to succeed yet he also wanted to set realistic expectations for his son. Adolescence frequently highlights the generation gap and brings conflict between fathers and sons. Mark Twain recognized this: "When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years." Having this generational conflict with my own father while at the same time respecting his counsel, I accepted the appointment to the Naval Academy. My Dad's last words to me as I departed Southern California were, "Son, Annapolis is a tough place. Plebe Summer is incredibly difficult. You may not last. Don't cancel your local college plans for this fall."

I was hurt. How could he think that might be the case? He was right. The editor published the following in my Annapolis yearbook, "Al came, looked around, got a free haircut, saw that he didn't like the place, and stayed." Throughout plebe summer, I simply wanted to survive another miserable parade or uniform inspection. My goal was to avoid gaining special attention by upperclassmen and thereby risk becoming an attrition statistic. I needed patience and daily persistence not to quit. My short term goal was simply to survive another day.

I then received a letter from home. My Dad closed his letter with the sentence, "Keep the long look." As more letters arrived, I soon realized it was his signature line. Throughout my first year I may have eaten three meals per day but I lived off of those letters. My Dad was feeding me and

developing me in a culture that required endurance. Out of nearly 1,600 freshmen less than 1,000 would graduate.

My short-term goal of meeting my parents on plebe-parent weekend grew to a long-term goal of saluting them at graduation. I realized that Dad's advice to me just before I left California had incited me to persevere. He took an immature teen and incentivized me toward my future not by *promising* but by *pushing* me toward hope. Struggling was no longer a signal for alarm but a sign of progress. As Brené Brown writes in *Daring Greatly*, "... hope is a combination of setting goals, having the tenacity and perseverance to pursue them, and believing in our own abilities ... If we're always following our children into the arena, hushing the critics, and assuring their victory, they'll never learn that they have the ability to dare greatly on their own."[5]

In the military, it takes persistence to acquire the technical skills and physiological competencies necessary to pilot a fighter jet. These proficiencies must be learned and practiced daily in order to sustain them. When an aviator achieves these skills and responds to the flight controls reflexively, she can simultaneously maintain real-time tactical presence while retain the enduring confidence of eventually catching the carrier three-wire upon landing. In another example, a sailor on a moonless night must exercise persistence in identifying buoys and simultaneously hold enduring hope of reaching the pier in the morning.

Summary

When both persistence and endurance are aligned, perseverance is the outcome. The virtue of perseverance develops organizational capacity and personal competency. As with the example of Marine Corps recruiting, it decreases attrition while building greater accountability. Perseverance is fueled by both short-term persistence and enduring long-term hope. These two ingredients of perseverance, persistence and endurance, are time-focused. You might say, 'She persisted for months,' or, 'The nation endured this for years.' It might be helpful to consider that the ancient Greeks had two words for time, *chronos* and *kairos*. We still use the first in words like 'chronological' and 'anachronism.' It refers to our calendar and clock time, measured in seconds, minutes, hours, and years. *Kairos* is different. Whereas *chronos* is quantitative, *kairos* is qualitative. It measures moments, not seconds. It seeks the right moment, the opportune moment,

5 Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* (New York: Avery, Reprint edition, 2015).

the perfect moment. Perseverance couples both of these time-focused words in a balanced approach of persistence and endurance. Persistence lives in *chronos* time. Endurance lives in *kairos* time. Let me share a personal example.

Both my calf muscles were in knots. Yet they did not bother me as much as the blisters on my feet. My knees continued to grind away as I limped along the Chesapeake and Ohio tow path toward the finish line. Whatever was I thinking when my friend and running mate, Graham, first asked me to run with him in the John F. Kennedy 50 Mile Ultramarathon? All I now knew was pain. Although my body continued to limp forward, my spirit to finish the race was eight miles behind me in the muddied footprints of my New Balance shoes. I had nothing more inside of me to count on. The knots in my muscles and blisters on my feet robbed me of all joy. I was now three miles from the finish line. I was at the 47-mile-point of a 50-mile race. But I was in serious trouble. I 'hit the wall' at the 39th mile and simply couldn't break through. 'Hitting the wall' is an expression that means your feet become sandbags, your mind becomes jelly, and you give up all heart to stay running. These last eight miles were all I could endure. For these eight miles I rambled on, encouraged by my running mate, Graham, who tried to keep me going. I was now furiously angry at him for convincing me to attempt to do such a lame brained activity as run a 50-mile race. I had never run an ultramarathon. I hadn't even run a regular marathon. What was I thinking?

In this race, persistence was measured by keeping one foot ahead of the other. This was the only metric I needed. It was a simple short-term endeavor that required me to be accountable to Graham if I were to be successful. Accountability was measured by decreasing the distance to the finish line. I needed patience to fight off the desire to simply 'get it over with.'

I was living in *chronos* time feeling deeper pain at every step. Counterbalancing this commitment to persistence was a desire to endure. In order for me to endure, I needed hope. I needed to fix my mind on crossing the finish line. It was an impossible horizon that I seemed unable to reach. Yet there was hope. I wanted to endure. This is the experience of *kairos* time. *Its focus is not the minute but the moment.* I no longer focused on my race time. That was simply *chronos* time. I needed something more. I thirsted for *kairos* time. My goal was to simply cross the finish line.

Completing the race would bring me qualitative joy because its focus is on my development and not my attrition. Put another way, persistence frequently focuses on short term gains. Endurance reaches for long term goals. Both persistence and endurance require progress measured in *chronos* and *kairos*. You need both to persevere.

Who do you admire for their perseverance? Are there family members and friends that exude persistence, patience, perseverance, and hope? David Brooks, in *The Road to Character*,[6] suggests great people have great models, "Thomas Aquinas argued that in order to lead a good life, it is necessary to focus more on our exemplars than on ourselves, imitating their actions as much as possible." Find those exemplars of perseverance, whether from those you know or those you read about, and grow from them. Perhaps you will be able to reflect their strength of character in your life as you model and grow in this significant virtue.

6 David Brooks, *The Road to Character* (New York: Random House, 2015).

	PERSEVERANCE	
	Requirements (Qualities)	
PERSISTENCE		ENDURANCE
	Central Ingredient	
Patience		Hope
	Duration	
Short Term Gains		Long Term Goals
	Contribution	
Capacity Building		Competency Enriching
Organizational		Personal
	Goal	
Habituate		Completion
	Tense	
Present Tense		Future Focused
	Metrics	
Lagging (looking back)		Leading (looking forward)
	Motto	
One day at a time		Keep the long look
	Measures	
Quantitative		Qualitative
	Ultramarathon	
Keep one foot ahead of the other		Crossing the finish line
	Sailor	
Finding the buoy		Reaching the pier
	Marine	
Clarify, Purify, Mortify		'Semper Fi'
	Midshipman	
Surviving Chow Call		Graduating

Figure 8.1 Elements of Perseverance as a Leadership Virtue